

A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

Intimacy and Immensity

Mark 1:21-39

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Amazement. How long has it been since you experienced amazement in your faith?

Mark's Gospel is a story told with passion and with urgency. Mark is utterly amazed at what he has seen and heard and is tripping over his pen to tell you about it all as quickly as he can. Though don't be fooled this is the tyranny of the urgent that makes a person rush breathless through a good story; this is the promise of the power of the present for those who have eyes to see: paying attention to what's in front of you with such openness that your whole life is changed by the encounter. Don't miss what is right in front of you. That's the essence of Mark's gospel and the beginning of all epiphany stories. The floodlights come on. Amazement and wonder at the coming of Jesus are for Mark, keys to understanding who gets it and who doesn't, who's with Jesus and who opposes him. Amazement and Wonder.

Luke takes time to tell us about the dawning of the Dayspring from on high like a sunrise gradually filling the earth with light. Matthew takes us on a journey with wise men from the east whose arrival and worship of the baby Jesus marks the message going into all the world. John leads us on a metaphysical journey to the heart of creation in the name of the Logos who was with God and who was God and who took on flesh.

Not Mark. Mark just gets right to it:

This is the Gospel of Jesus Christ the son of God. By the time the first chapter is complete, Jesus has made his appearance, been baptized, been driven into and delivered from the wilderness, called four fishermen disciples, preached in a synagogue, delivered a man from an evil spirit, healed Peter's mother in law and countless sick, oppressed by demons, and lepers, found time to sneak away to pray by himself, and announce that his ministry would be on foot as he began to go through all the towns of Galilee preaching the good news of the Kingdom of God.

And all of that is just chapter 1 of this Gospel. In a couple of weeks, we are going into the season of Lent when readings from the Gospel of John will take over from Mark for a while. The pace slows down with John as John tends to explain things through long speeches and signs, and leads us into thoughtful meditation over what we are seeing and hearing. But the passion of Mark's heart is where we begin with the Gospels. This is the first and earliest of the four Gospels.

The first hearers of Jesus's message didn't know what to make of what was happening right in front of their eyes and ears. Things were happening too fast for them to sit together and practice patient thoughtful theological discernment. They could hardly have worked out the

trinitarian implications of Jesus's baptism and the voice from heaven saying, "You are my beloved son; with you, I am well pleased."

But when Jesus spoke, they knew. They knew they were hearing something they'd not heard in a long time, if ever. They were hearing truth with authority. This preacher was not peddling someone else's teachings but was bringing a Word from God. Mark doesn't even tell us what Jesus said in his first sermon in the synagogue, but he tells us the reaction of the crowd. This preacher—the way he spoke, what he said. There's something different about him. They knew it immediately. He taught as one with true authority. We might say authenticity, but that doesn't go far enough. We might say with integrity, but that only begins to get at it. He spoke as one who not only was describing the living water, not only had tasted it, but who himself was the fount of it. He spoke not only as someone who had a recipe for the bread of life, not only had tasted it, but who himself was the bread to be broken open for the feedings of all the hunger of the world and your own deepest hunger.

Mark says they were astonished or they were amazed. There's not one single English word to translate this. But the root of the Greek word is to blow, or to be struck down. They were knocked down; they were blown away. Maybe it's a little too colloquial for translators, but every time in Mark's Gospel this word appears replace amaze with blown away, and it works every time. They encountered Jesus and they were blown away.

Even though in English they are all often just translated "amazed," Mark uses a variety of words to describe the shock and awe of being in the presence of Jesus. One of them like in 1.22 is to be blown away, as they were by the authoritative teaching of Jesus. Another word, in 1.27 after Jesus silenced and cast out the evil spirit, is more like "astonished" and had overtones of fear and alarm to it. "What is this?" they asked, "even the unclean spirits obey him." Being blown away is the experience of delight. Being astonished includes the feeling of awe and fear. Something much bigger than I am is at work here and I am not sure exactly what to make of this yet. If the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, it is like awe, a recognition in your gut that God is bigger than you are. That sounds so trite, but the experience is not trite. It's when you realize God does not fit in my pocket or my dictionary or my control. When you have that experience, it's humbling. In a good way. In the very best way.

We need both kinds of amazement. We need delight, and we need astonishment. With delight, our eyes become saucers, our ears radio antennae, our smiles ear to ear, our heartbeat quickens. This is joy. Jesus is Savior. We experience the intimacy of our savior.

With astonishment, our eyes begin to see what's really in front of us, our ears begin to understand the implications; our lips begin to whisper a confession of faith; our heart becomes full. This is faith. Jesus is Lord. This is the immensity of Jesus in front of us.

The crowds not only experienced all of this; it transformed them. They not only experienced Jesus, that experience changed them. You see it not only in their words; you see it in their devotion and their missionary response. They told everyone until the whole town showed up at

the door to experience his teaching and healing. The holy wind that blew them away then filled the sails of their spirits as they began spreading the good news.

When was the last time you were amazed by something? Anything? When was the last time you experienced delight or astonishment? When was the last time you were blown away by God?

Maybe we adults are too grown up or too mature, too sophisticated or callous, or cautious to be amazed very often. I know I can be, or sometimes think I am. I was raised in a setting that emphasized that we were to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind. Mind was always emphasized, I think because so much denominational foolishness devalued the role of the mind, actually using your God-given brain in your faith. It was a tough time. Settled science was being rejected while theologically rich hymns were being set on a shelf, replaced by the endless repetition of trite songs to Jesus, who appears as the direct object of your romantic affections. By the time a song ended, you weren't quite sure if it was a biblical psalm or a valentine's day card. It was all a little confusing.

So we were told to love the Lord your God with heart and soul and your *mind*. And mind was always written in italics and spoken with gravitas, like we'd discovered something that had been lost. Maybe we had. Maybe we had discovered something that had been lost, but maybe we had the tendency to lose something too. Maybe we lost the capacity to delight in God and be simply astonished.

In Mark's telling, the experience of amazement is the heart of encounter with Christ, genuine encounter by anyone who is not closed off to him or opposed to him. In Mark, crowds are amazed, evil spirits tremble, disciples are astonished, a Roman soldier confesses his own faith in awe of him even at his death on a cross. In the whole Gospel of Mark, the only people who are not astonished, who are not amazed, who do not delight in him ever, are the Scribes and Pharisees—they are threatened, they question him, they challenge him, they ultimately try to crush him. They are never amazed. They stand outside the potent, intimate, immense wonder of God. Of God's powerful, redemptive presence, and they scoff. Like Psalm 1 says, they sit in the seat of scoffers, their delight is not in the Lord.

What a pity.

What a shame. And it's a shame shared by too many of us too who are too busy or too important or too worried or too calloused to be amazed. But the thing is, that even if you recognize all of this, can't make yourself be amazed. You can't decide to be amazed—not by trying really hard or feeling bad if you're not amazed. Amazement is something that happens to you and in you, not by you. That's the whole point. You're not in control of amazement. It's a response that happens in you in response to something else that happens. It just overtakes you.

So how long has it been?

There is something we can do to be open to amazement: Pay attention. I don't mean just pay attention to what I'm about to say, I mean *pay attention*. Someone recently said that if you want to love someone say this, "What's going on with you? Tell me. I have all day."

We live in a world and in a time that we are trained to not pay attention to one thing because so many things grab us and pull us in so many different directions at once, and so to simply have the discipline of paying attention...opens us up to a world that is passing us by and a presence of God that we are not attuned to.

Simply pay better attention and you will find the scales fall from your eyes, you will feel your heart begin to soften, and you will find love welling up in you. Simply by paying better attention. Return to Scripture, and pay close attention to everything you see there in God's Word and as God's Word for you. Christ is speaking to you. Pay attention to what's happening in the world, in the spring time buds, in the stars in the sky, in the bird's song, in a child's laughter. Christ is present to you. Pay attention to the gift of this day. It's the only one you can inhabit at one time. Christ is redeeming you and calling you.

Simone Weil said that attention is the rarest and purist form of generosity. She even elevated this attention-paying beyond an act of loving generosity. She called it prayer, "Attention, taken to its highest degree, is the same thing as prayer. It presupposes faith and love. Absolutely unmixed attention is prayer."

Maybe we are not blown away more often because we are too distracted blustering through life to pay attention to what should and could amaze us: a Bible story read with fresh eyes, the stars in the sky viewed on a dark night. bees, clouds, your grandmother's stories, a psalm, a Gospel, grace, amazing grace.

The author Alexandra Horowitz rediscovered this on a walk around her neighborhood. Realizing she was missing so much around her she took a walk with great concentration to notice everything she could notice. She thought she'd done pretty well. Then she took a walk with a three-year-old, and realized how much she'd missed. And then she took the same walk with a dog. And then with an artist, a geologist, a physician, and a sound designer. Through their eyes, she began to appreciate the wonder of what was described centuries ago by St. Clare of Assisi as the first step in prayer: *a penetrating gaze into the heart of reality*. Simply being open to the presence of God.

This presence comes in teaching and in learning, and it comes in suffering and God's compassionate presence with us in our suffering. And it comes in healing and deliverance from all of that which crushes our spirits. It comes in the journey, and it comes in the destination. It comes in the prayer, and it comes in the answered prayer.

For Clare as for all Christian mystics, "the object of our gaze is the crucified Savior who stands before us as a mirror in which we see ourselves." Our desire to pay attention to everything as

Christ is a response to the restless love God has for us. (Roch Niemier, *In the Footsteps of Francis and Clare*, 116)”

When they heard Jesus preach, when they saw Jesus heal, they were amazed. They were blown away. And don't our hearts hunger for that same kind of experience again. What it felt like was awesome: wonder, delight, and more than a little fear and trembling.

I pray this for you. That you find yourself in the joy of reading Scripture, in divine assurance in your prayers, in your own healing and in the healing of those who have asked you to pray for them . . . I pray that you experience a little of this again. More than a little. I pray that it meet you and overwhelm you and draw your heart into the intimacy and the immensity of God's grace and God's presence with you. I pray the holy fire burn in your heart.

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